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# The Chican@ Nueva Onda as a Poetic Tidal Wave: The Revitalization, Repoliticalization & Redefinition of “Chican@” Through Poetry

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**Abstract:** The term *Chican@* has in the 21<sup>st</sup> century undergone a resurgence and new use and practice in border regions and among activist poets, indicating a new civil rights movement, in response to xenophobic laws directed toward the Latin@ community. This movement has taken on many aspects of the 1960s Chicano movement, but what is different is that this resurgence has occurred in the literary arts with writers and artists as the leaders of the movement. This study highlights poets at the forefront of a new Chican@ Renaissance, discussing the history, growth and redefinition of Chican@ poetry during the past thirteen years, since 9/11.

**Key Terms:** Contemporary Chican@ Poetry, Border Poetics, Latin@s and 9/11

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In the late 1960s and 1970s, when the term *Chicano* was first adopted by Mexican American radicals, it was used to establish a political identity with a history and culture that challenged the dominant “Mexican” or “American” identity.<sup>1</sup> When young Mexican-American protesters took on the moniker, it was meant to instill pride in being Mexican-American, in speaking Spanish, and to challenge the racist and culturally biased laws of the time. But while “[o]ften employed as a synonym for Mexican American,” says Michael Víctor Sedano, ‘Chicano’ is a controversial term; it is not universally recognized as a self-referent by Mexican Americans and other Latinos, and some Mexican Americans vehemently reject the term. Chicano rhetoric represented *Chicanismo* as a new cultural force that could improve Mexican-American identity and liberate the oppressed MexicanAmerican” (177). I argue that following the Chicano movement of the 60s and 70s, and subsequent Chicana creative movement, the term Chican@<sup>2</sup> became synonymous with the 1960s and political action. But recently, due to political and social attacks on the U.S. Latin@ community, the term has come back with new definition and purpose for a new generation.

One of the major tools used to foster awareness of the plight of the Latin@ communities has been the arts and in particular, poetry. As noted in a personal interview with María Miranda Maloney, owner and operator of Mouthfeel Press:

We have been shaped by our struggles and the politics of this country. Traditionally, Chican@ writers, with their gift for words, have undertaken the responsibility to communicate the struggle and process through poetry and stories. So, I think that this is nothing new, as far as writers being politically involved. In the 1970s and into the 1980s, the Chicana writers were already writing about politically charged issues and so it has been there all this time. (Telephone interview)

For Chican@ poets, writing is a political act, a form of protest in a country where Latin@s and other people of color have been and continue to be oppressed through laws and societal practices. The act of writing one’s own story through one’s voice disrupts the mainstream narrative of a homogenous American identity.

Several new centers of activity are brewing for Chican@ poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but for this article I will focus on three in particular: the Border Poets, in the regions of New Mexico and Texas; the Poets Responding to SB 1070 out of California; and the *Librotráfico* Movement out of Houston. These three have come together in recent years to reveal a new poetry, a new civil rights movement, and a new sense of the importance of

the arts. There are several factors that have contributed to the poetics of these various groups, but none would have been as successful were it not for the advent of social media, which continues to be the most effective tool for activism in our current multi-connected, smartphone based world.

The 1960s was not merely a sea change in American culture; it was also a sea change for poetry in the United States. It was during this revolutionary era that poetry became increasingly political and the Chican@ poets were no exception. Recently there has been a proliferation of Chican@ poetry that has been spurred by the rising tide of anti-Latin@ legislation being passed as well as anti-Latin@ sentiment being put forth by right-wing conservatives. The building of a new border wall was the first stone thrown in this new battle for civil rights. Although immigration has been an issue in this country for years, it was the terrorist attacks of 9/11 that turned immigration into a national security issue. In her article, "All Along the Watchtower: Acculturation Fear, Anti-Latino Affect and Immigration," political scientist Regina Branton writes, "In the months after the 9/11 attacks, widely publicized reports of apprehensions of individuals from 'special interest' countries appeared in the media and some politicians went so far as to explicitly link migrants to terrorists" (665).

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights published a report presenting evidence of how the U.S. ignored international law by building a border wall and presented evidence of several human rights violations. The building of the wall between Mexico and the United States, a politically motivated piece of legislation, first surfaced in Congress in 1996, but it was not until after 2001 that the Secure Fence Act gained traction, and in 2006 it passed.<sup>3</sup> The Mexico-United States border is no stranger to vigilantism, and according to Peter Yoxall, "[I]n the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and with a new sense of vigilance in the United States, citizen activism on the United States-Mexico border has been revolutionized by a highly publicized and politicized citizen activist border group, the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (MDCDC), which is part of the Minuteman Project" (520). Volunteer representatives of this group stationed themselves along border regions of Arizona and New Mexico, causing increased tension with the Latin@ communities by detaining immigrants, patrolling the border with rifles and even firing on immigrants (Yoxall, 530). In fact, both the building of the new border wall and the arrival of

the Minutemen impelled writers and poets to create. In an interview, Jessica Helen López, author of the poetry collection, *Always Messing with Them Boys*, says:

I started writing about the Minute Men, the racist groups of vigilantes along the border, whose main goal was to violently harass Mexican immigrants. I was incredulous over their arrogant racism they unabashedly displayed. How could our country allow this to happen? It was all over the news. It was my responsibility to write response after response via my poetry. And that I did. (Telephone interview)

López was not alone; several writers and poets began to write poems against such targeted racism. They started to host poetry readings near the border wall, from California to Texas. The border wall became a central focus for Chican@s, as reflected by Isaac Chavarría—a border poet from the Río Grande Valley of South Texas—in his poem, "No se terminan":

a border wall  
aplastando la tierra  
separating you from me  
me from them

a border patrol station  
in Falfurrias  
every trip we answer  
"Yes, sir" to  
"Are you a U.S citizen?"  
Alton, Mission, Río Grande Valley  
las tierras desgraciadas, to  
"Where are you coming from?"  
"Yes, sir" to  
"Is this your car?" (69)

Over the past thirteen years the border has seen more activity, both artistically and politically (not only in response to U.S. laws shrouded under "national security"), but also because of the tumultuous changing political landscape in Mexico, where according to a report by the

Council on Foreign Affairs dated January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, more than 40,000 people have been killed since 2006 (Human Rights Watch puts that number at over 60,000; Gilman). As a result, the influx of Mexican nationals north across the border has increased. In "Refugees From Mexico Drug War Flee to U.S.," Andrew Becker writes, "Unlike the traditional job-seeking migrants, whose numbers have dropped in part due to the slumping U.S. economy and increased border enforcement, this new migrant class comprises business owners, executives and other professionals who choose safety in the United States—even if it means detention—over freedom in their own country." (Becker) This wave of new refugees changes not only the demographics of the area, but the border identity as well.

### EL CHUCO AND ITS CHICAN@ SPIRIT

Recently a growing contingent of writers and poets has begun to organize in El Paso through readings and publishing. Identifying as Chican@s, they use their stories and poems about the border to help politicize the Latin@ base. In the introduction to *Literary El Paso*, Marcia Hatfield Daudistel writes, "Many groundbreaking Chicano writers began their work in El Paso: such as José Antonio Burciaga, Abelardo Delgado, Estela Portillo Trambley and Arturo Islas" (i). These writers demonstrated early commitment to social and political activism in their work.

In an interview with Emmy Pérez, a California transplant and author of *Solstice*, she states that she created her identity of Chicana living in El Paso: "Interestingly, enough people think that because I am from California that is why I call myself a Chicana poet, but no, it is because I moved to El Paso" (Personal interview). I argue that due to the changing politics and demographics of the border, contemporary poets now embrace a Chican@ identity.

Not only has the border wall inspired poets to reclaim the term Chican@, but it appears frequently in performances as well. Designed to take on the issues of the Latin@ and border community through the performance art of poetry readings, the Barbed Wire Reading Series, created by Verónica Guajardo and Trent Hudley in 2007, is El Paso's longest running poetry open mic series. As noted by Diana Taylor, "Instead of privileging texts and narratives, we could also look to scenarios [performances] as meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors and potential outcomes" (28). For Taylor, performance and text go hand in hand to create social practices that work to close the gap between

text and body. Performance becomes central to the new Chican@ poetics scene, especially in border communities like El Paso and the Río Grande Valley of South Texas.

The Barbed Wire Reading Series generated an interest in reaching wider audiences. When Mouthfeel Press was created in El Paso by María Miranda Maloney in 2009, its purpose was to fill a void, as well as giving women a space to publish. Mouthfeel Press publishes chapbooks and anthologies of experimental poetry, and hosts community poetry readings, in English and Spanish, and strongly believes that "writing is activism" (see mission statement on online website). The press offers space to any border writer desiring to publish.

Maloney states that she was influenced by Chicana feminist poets of the 1970s and 80s, such as Lorna Dee Cervantes and Bernice Zamora. Explaining why she began the press, she states, "Living on the border with the situation in Mexico and after 9/11 was something that was affecting us and being expressed. I wanted to give people a space to publish. Whether poetry or fiction, those are legitimate historical documents, and I wanted to make sure they had a publishing outlet" (Telephone interview).

The changing socio-political landscape has affected not only long term Mexican-American communities of El Paso, but also new immigrants, representative of the changing demographics. One of these new voices is Laura Cesarco Eglín: Uruguayan by birth, she has lived in El Paso for the past four years, and was drawn to the Chican@ poetry scene despite her trepidations about its traditionally Mexican-American origins, as noted in an interview: "Well, not only me, but also people coming from Mexico and even Mexican Americans have this question of 'how do I fit into the Chican@ scene?' It can tend to be a closed scene. For me being from Uruguay, which is really far away, it is easier, because living in El Paso made me think a lot about my identity, and about who I was and what I was" (Telephone interview). She quickly acclimated to the El Paso Chican@ poetry scene as a recurring reader at the Barbed Wire Reading Series. She also became managing editor for the El Paso-based bilingual literary journal, *BorderSenses*. Cesarco Eglín espouses and observes a new definition of "Chican@" as a member of the increasing presence of Latin American immigrants on the border who have found poetic homes in that space.

In border communities like El Paso, the most common language spoken is neither English nor Spanish,

but Spanglish (or Tex-Mex), a hybrid mixture of the two languages substituting words like *typear* (to type) or *yonque* (junkyard). In that third space of culture and nationality that is, to quote an old *dicho*, neither one nor the other but something else, and what Gloria Anzaldúa referred to as the inhabited space of *la frontera*, the “borderlands,” experimentation and blending occurs, but also contradictions, and these coexist. In this space, the Chican@ movement has lived and flourished for decades, and now with the inclusion of immigrants from South America, a global sense of identity is being formed. As noted by Cesarco Eglin:

I felt very comfortable in El Paso, being who I was and at the same time opening up to a new minority and also being part of that minority. I was able to identify with what this community was going through, what it was writing. I also felt very comfortable with the code-switching, because, having lived two years in the U.S. when I was younger, I felt at home with this language. The border gave me the possibility to learn about another people that I feel very close to. I felt a part of this community and that's why Maria Maloney would always tell me, “Oh come on, you are a Chicana.”<sup>4</sup>

In that same interview, Cesarco Eglin states, “In my own poetry, I tend to separate English and Spanish. I hardly incorporate any English into my poetry, maybe a title here and there. My border experience changed me in other ways; it changed what I was writing because it was mind-opening, in the sense that suddenly I understood that it is not black or white. The border allows you to think in shades of gray.” Writing in Spanish challenges the linguistic dominance of English in the United States and particularly in the Chican@ literary scene, where writers often code switch in English and Spanish.

### UN TRIP TO EL VALLE

The other end of the Texas-Mexico border, where the Río Grande empties into the Gulf of Mexico, the Río Grande Valley of South Texas, has experienced not only a population explosion in recent times, but also a literary

renaissance in the past fifteen years. Longstanding individuals who have promoted poetry in the Río Grande Valley include Amado Balderas-Tijerina, Brenda Riojas, Daniel García Ordaz and the Narcisco Martínez Writers Group. And since 2007, when the annual Río Grande Valley International Poetry Festival was launched by Daniel García Ordaz, poetry readings became more frequent, and two new presses, VAO Publishing and Otras Voces Publishing, have started to publish Río Grande Valley authors. Poets like Lady Mariposa, Erika Johnson and Lauren Espinoza have also made a presence performing their unique Chican@ poetics. This community of poets and writers has challenged the status quo of Chican@ poetics. Currently, Isaac Chavarría and Gabriel Sánchez are working toward promoting the publication of chapbooks and the promotion of Chican@ poetry books.

Chavarría has begun to embrace and change the definition of one term in particular: “Pocho,” a derogative term for Mexican Americans who are seen as too anglicized. In the blog, *Nuevas voces poéticas*, he states: “My poetry is influenced by popular music in the Río Grande Valley, including Norteño, Banda, Tejano, Huapango, among others. I have loyalties to both Mexican and regional ideals. It is a back and forth between living within and reacting to the North American and Mexican cultures” (“Pocho”).

Gabriel Sánchez began his poetic activist work in the late 1990s, by partnering with Isaac Chavarría to establish Raving Press. They have now published several chapbooks for poets and social activist organizations. Sánchez is also someone who would not be considered Chican@ in the traditional sense since he was born in Mexico and comes into the poetics as an immigrant, but because he has lived in Chican@ communities for most of his life, he has embraced this identity. In the publication “Chicano,” Sánchez says, “The soul of the Chican@ is the same as the Chicano/a; the same as the Mexican/American; the same as the Pocho; the same as the Indígena; the same as the Mestizo throughout the Americas and the world. ‘Chican@’ is awareness of the self in the context of a political, social and cultural struggle between a majority versus differing minorities” (“Chicano”). By declaring a Chican@ identity, he has forced the definition to be called into question.

Another Valley poet, Rossy Lima, considers herself both an immigrant writer and Chican@. Arriving from Mexico at age twelve, she learned to acclimate to American



culture after living several years in a border community, where she did not have to give up writing in Spanish (much like Laura Cesarco Eglín). "La expresión lírica se aborda en esta región fronteriza como literatura inmigrante, Chicana y en un censo menor la de exilio"<sup>5</sup> ("Inmigrante"). Although Lima considers herself an immigrant writer, she has learned to embrace Chican@ identity while challenging the preconceived notions of what the term Chican@ means. Her writing reveals a sense that Chican@s are as much exiles in their own land as the immigrant feels trying to settle in. This becomes the thread that she can pick up and identify with in her own work. Her poem "Aguacamino" reads:

Que la casa abandonada en el sur  
nunca apague su antorcha,  
desde la nueva tierra alcanzo a ver  
el humo de la nostalgia,  
del aguacamino.  
Ese humo trae mariposas cada año,  
y mi corazón las sigue  
gritando "Papalotzín" hasta que  
despierto.  
Que por entre el suelo y el aire  
mi cuerpo sea siempre frontera,  
que mi lágrima deje de ser lágrima,  
que estos ojos dejen de ser ojos,  
que sean espejos anchos y viajeros.<sup>6</sup>  
(22)

Here Lima relates the immigrant as well as the border experience in equating her body to a borderland. In this poem there is a longing for what was once lost and never can be regained. By writing in Spanish, Lima challenges the poetics of the mainstream U.S. literary landscape. In the interview discussing her publishing of Spanish manuscripts, María Miranda Maloney says, "For me, it has been an important process because it has allowed us to see beyond the border and expose people to the idea that a lot of the struggles we have transcend borders, and that recognition has been part of the process of our changing poetics" (Telephone interview).

#### **HOW FACEBOOK AND ARIZONA BROUGHT THE CHICAN@ MOVEMENT ROARING BACK**

The year 2008 became a crucial year for Latin@s in this country as a result of a new anti-Latin@ backlash. In

fact, the election of Barack Obama as the first African-American president saw the rise of the ultra-conservative Tea Party protest group, with an idealism that mixes overt racist themes, in the case of Latin@s, with such mantras as: "Illegal aliens are here illegally," and "English as our core language is required."<sup>7</sup> Tea Party activity was most strongly felt in the border state of Arizona, which in turn became the focal point for Latin@ activism. With the passage of the now infamous Senate Bill 1070<sup>8</sup> in 2010—known as the "Show Me Your Papers" law—along with the passage of House Bill 2281<sup>9</sup> (which banned Mexican-American Studies), it was clear to the Latin@ community that they were being targeted.

It was shortly after SB 1070 and HB 2281 were passed in Arizona in 2010 that California poet Francisco X. According to poet Carmen Calatayud, after he invited others to write poetry responding to SB 1070, Alarcón's Facebook page became so flooded with poems from all over the country and all over the world he had to "create a Facebook page called Poets Responding to SB 1070" (Telephone interview). His Facebook page currently averages more than 7,000 followers per week and he continues to post poems and immigrant rights news daily. In fact, the page became so popular that Alarcón had to ask for help managing it. "That is how I got involved," says Carmen Calatayud in a personal interview. She adds, "Our page offers more than just a place for people to express their anger about racism and the bias against immigrants through poetry. The poetry is a way for poets to express their hope and faith that we can change things together and have an impact." As Poets Responding to SB 1070 grew, it began to awaken the Chican@ movement in a way not seen in several years.

Poets Responding to SB 1070 created a space where poetry could take the lead in being part of a new social movement. As people began to post comments, poets across the country began to stage readings and protests around the issues in Arizona and throughout the country. For the first time in a long time, Chican@ came back into the dialogue of many Latin@s. What separates Chican@ from the Latin@ identity is the political aspect of it: Chican@ has always been a term of agitation and so Chican@ poetry is a poetry that challenges the status quo through telling stories and stating grievances. Carmen Calatayud states that poetry has never been as important as it is now and "poetry has always been political." The project Poets Responding to SB 1070 has taken on a

leadership role in this new Latin@ civil rights movement, garnering such global attention that its creators have been invited to conduct panels across the country and even created an anthology published by the University of Arizona Press, but its major achievement has been its presence.

The way we receive information and the way we are able to post writings on a webpage reaching a global audience unfiltered and practically uncensored is a major milestone. In a personal interview with Lupe Méndez, a poet based in Houston, he notes the following: “Poets can post their stuff on Poets Responding to SB 1070 and tag other people and that gets posted on the page. That’s immediate, that’s responsive, that’s the instantaneous flow of words into someone’s head and then garner a response to that. It’s more universally communal than we could have ever imagined.” It was through the Poets Responding to SB 1070 page that other activist groups began to operate through social media but also through more physical and interactive ways. Communities have been brought together through social media, such as the new Chican@ movement. One community in Houston, however, took a 1960s approach to social activism through the revolution and created the Librotraficante Caravan.

In 2012, a group of Houston-based poets and writers launched a caravan to travel from Houston to Tucson with trunks filled with banned books to deliver to the students of Tucson. Called the “Librotraficante Caravan,” it started as a joke at a meeting of the radio producers for *Nuestra palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say*, a monthly reading series founded by Tony Díaz in 1998 to feature nationally published writers, as well as new writers from the Latino community. This created a base for developing writers and activists, a reading public and a network that would wind up stretching across several states. According to member Lupe Méndez, “We’ve had a long history of bringing Latino writers here into Houston and twisting the heads of folks who would have said that there is no market for brown writers in Houston, and we said actually there is and we can prove it to you, and so we would bring writers in.”<sup>10</sup> Latin@ voices were brought to the airwaves, but after the new bills in Arizona and the Poets Responding to SB 1070 page was created, *Nuestra palabra* mobilized both physically and electronically. “For us here in Houston, it was very shocking,” Méndez says, “because that was one thing we were marketing against with the radio show, *Nuestra palabra*” (Telephone

interview). Because of the unique space *Nuestra palabra* occupied in the Latin@ world, they were in an excellent position to connect the various pockets of Latin@ activists to a single movement.

In a personal interview, Tony Díaz relates how “literally fourteen or fifteen years before Librotraficante takes off, I had the privilege of working with thousands of volunteers, poets, writers, professors, thinkers, etc.” Then he “connected all of these networks.” The caravan idea was a tactic Díaz says he stole from the Hippies and Yippies of the 1960s, that only art can save us. Librotraficante became nationally focused on social protest when “we started looking at what our brothers and sisters were doing in New Mexico, in Arizona and learning from them.”

The caravan was organized almost exclusively through social media, connecting members of their group with local poets and major figures like Lorna Dee Cervantes and Sandra Cisneros. Their trek from Houston to Tucson made several stops along the route to do public readings and collect books. As they stopped in city after city, their popularity grew and they received money and books. In New Mexico, Jessica Helen López recalls how she became involved: “The severity of the preposterous and frightful SB 1070 generated mass proactive responses. The protest readings culminated [with] a farewell to the traveling Librotraficante poets, with Rudolfo Anaya speaking at the National Hispanic Cultural Center” (Telephone interview). Such events were typical at various stops and ended up connecting Latin@ writers and activists in a way they had not been before.

When the caravan ended, the Librotraficante group came up with the idea of establishing several underground libraries across the country. Lupe Méndez explains: “We created a community-based library that serves as an access point for people to get interested in their reading and then, if they still want to get more information, to do more research—your public library is still your best resource.”<sup>11</sup> This endeavor requires communities to donate space and create their own checkout systems where anyone can come in and check out any of the Arizona banned books, plus others. Now their hope, according to Díaz’s interview, is: “That these underground libraries would be hotbeds for culture, literature, the poets you are writing about, but at the same time we are preserving the legacies [that] these writers clearly defined”. With these libraries and social media, Chican@ literature is seeing a

renaissance that could only have been fostered in an era of political and social upheaval. If Arizona's xenophobic laws had not been passed, the Chican@ community might not be seeing the revival it is seeing now. The one thing that cannot be ignored is the role that technology has played in this Chican@ Renaissance. As I see it, the new Chican@ movement was made possible by two things: poetry and technology. As Carmen Calatayud proclaimed in her interview: "Social media is not filtered, it is not a journal approving poets or poems, it's not a news media source approving the news we are posting. The idea of being able to post to sources that are unfiltered is a revolution in itself."

## ENDNOTES

- 1 From "Chicano: Origin and Meaning" by Edward A. Stephenson.
- 2 In this article I use the @ symbol to indicate both genders, rather than referring to Chicana or Chicano (or Latino/Latina) separately, particularly to not privilege one gendered use over the other but instead choose to place both genders on the same playing field.
- 3 In June of 2008, a comprehensive government study on the Border Wall issued that:  
Government officials have provided no evidence that terrorists are using the Texas/Mexico border to enter the United States. It has been well-established that the 9/11 terrorists entered the country through legal immigration channels, and there have been no credible reports that terrorists are now more inclined to sneak across land borders. If terrorists were to attempt to cross a land border illegally to enter the United States, it is more likely that they would cross into the United States from Canada, since there are fewer controls on the Canadian border. (Gilman, 9-10)
- 4 Telephone interview. 20 May 2013.
- 5 "The poetry of the border region has many of the same elements in common with *immigrante* literature, and like the Chican@s, they feel just as exiled."
- 6 The Water Way  
That abandoned house in the south  
its torch never stops burning,

from this new land I struggle to see  
the nostalgic smoke,  
the water way.  
This smoke brings butterflies each year,  
and my heart still  
yells "Papalotzin" until it awakens.  
Between the earth and the air  
my body is the border,  
my tears cease to be tears,  
these eyes are no longer eyes,  
they are wide mirrors and travellers.

- 7 17 May 2013. <<http://www.teaparty.org/about-us/>>.
- 8 The "Show Me Your Papers" law states, "For any lawful contact made by a law enforcement official or agency of this state or a county, city, town or other political subdivision of this state where reasonable suspicion exists that the person is an alien who is unlawfully present in the United States, a reasonable attempt shall be made, when practicable, to determine the immigration status of the person" (2).
- 9 Stated in the Declaration of Policy statement of HB 2281, "the legislature finds and declares that public school pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people" (1).
- 10 Telephone interview. 21 May 2013.
- 11 Telephone interview. 22 May 2013.

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